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Navajo Health Advocacy Week Makes Washington Impression in Senate, House, and Federal Agencies

Committee Chairman Thomas Walker and Health Executive Director Anslem Roanhorse & Local Steering Committee Members work together in Advocating for Navajo Health Priorities

WASHINGTON, D.C.—A delegation of Navajo health officials lead by Health and Social Services Committee Chairman Thomas Walker met with Senate and House leaders this week advocating for increases in appropriations for health programs and projects for FY 2008.

"We delivered our message to increase spending in Indian Health Services for more health care and Navajo facility projects," said Navajo Nation Council Health and Social Services Committee Chairman Thomas Walker, Council Delegate of Bird Springs, Leupp, and Tolani Lake. "Staffing for Red Mesa community health center remains a high priority, along with construction funding which includes Kayenta, set for 2009."

"We were very successful in our meetings," said Chairman Walker, who is the new chair of the Health and Social Services Committee. "We're going to continue to work on increasing funding for Navajo area IHS and for our projects."

Chairman Walker praised the Navajo delegation for working together which included representatives from the two branches, executive and legislative, and local communities of Dilkon and Kayenta.

The delegation began their series of meetings on Tuesday with Dr. Charles Grim, director of the Indian Health Services in Rockville, MD. Dr. Grim said to the group that he has not decided on *grandfathering* the priority list used by IHS for new construction projects. A major announcement affecting Navajo is expected on Friday, March 16.



The group which included Anslem Roanhorse, executive director for Division of Health presented a packet of 12 issue papers ranging from FY 2008 appropriations to the Special Diabetes Program.

Tuesday's meetings continued with Assistant Surgeon General, Dr. Eric Broderick, with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services (SAMHSA). Herman Largo who oversees the Behavioral Health Services department in Window Rock led the meeting and asked for the administration's support in staffing and operational funding for the Navajo Nation Regional Adult Residential Treatment Center. The \$15.7 million construction project in Shiprock is expected to be complete in August 2008. Largo stressed the need for technical assistance and support from SAMHSA headquarters, asking for government staff to be assigned to assist with the tribe's funding, construction, and program operation costs.

Navajo Nation Washington Office Legislative Associate Randall Simmons, who set up this week's meetings, conducted early briefings as he directed advocating on Capitol Hill. Simmons worked closely with the Navajo Division of Health, including Roselyn Begay.

On Wednesday the delegation met with the staff of Congresswoman Heather Wilson (R-NM-1), thanking her for her support in last year's appropriations for leading 45 House members who signed a joint letter to keep urban Indian health services from budget cuts. The program was refunded. In February 2007, President Bush again proposed to completely cut funding for the urban health program in his FY 2008 budget request. Rep. Wilson's staff assured the Navajo group of their strong commitment to work this year to keep the program, and increase funding for Indian Health Services.

Members of the delegation moved to the Senate offices to meet with the staff of Senator Jeff Bingaman (D-NM), asking for his support of the reauthorization of the Indian Health Care Improvement Act, while stressing the need for health care facility construction for Dilkon and Kayenta. "We thank Senator Bingaman for his support last year," said Chairman Walker. "We would appreciate his support again this year for the reauthorization."

Anslem Roanhorse detailed proposed cuts in FY 2008 budget, item by item, outlining a \$24 million loss in Indian Health Services 12 area offices, including sanitation construction, facilities just some programs slated for cuts.

During the meeting Hank Haskie, who represents the Special Diabetes Project for Navajo, asked the Senate staff to support funding for diabetes. "We want to ask for a large portion of funds to be focused on community prevention," said Haskie. "Although diabetes has been funded for eight years, it's like how medicine worked through 40 years during the cancer epidemic before results were shown." Haskie stressed the importance of diabetes and gave points on how effective the Navajo program has been since inception.

Senator Bingaman's staff affirmed their leadership for addressing the citizenship documentation issue, a newly invoke guideline issued by Medicare and Medicaid offices last year on proof of citizenship for healthcare services. The guideline was developed from Medicare Reform passed in the 109th congress. The Navajo delegation asked the Senator for



his support in recognizing that Navajo issued Certificates of Indian blood suffice as proof of citizenship.

Elmer Clark who represents the Dilkon community said to Bingaman's staff, "We've followed the process for 35 years," referring to the construction of the Dilkon Health Center. The Dilkon project was approved by the IHS Budget Justification Document. The architectural design and engineering phase is now a concern in the face of proposed budget decreases.

Kayenta Health Steering Committee Chairperson Helen Bonnaha spoke with staff of the House Committee on Natural Resources for the construction of the Kayenta Health Services Center. "In 1950 the government tore down a tuberculosis sanitarium promising to replace it with a hospital," she said. Bonnaha asked for the construction to be moved up one calendar year to save cost for inflation increases. Kayenta remains on the current priority list for construction.

House Resources Committee staff said a markup is scheduled for April on the Indian Health Care Improvement Act, the same time which a hearing will occur. The committee staff pledge Resources Committee Chairman Nick Rahall (D-WV-3) support that the bill has "got to go" this year.

Today, the Navajo delegation attended a Senate Indian Affairs Committee Hearing on the Indian Health Care Improvement Act. Committee Chairman Byron Dorgan (D-ND) told the Assistant Deputy Attorney General C. Frederick Beckner, with the U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division that the "Justice Department killed the bill last year," by issuing a "white paper" to one caucus last September. "How is it that a white paper showed up last year," asked Chairman Dorgan, holding a copy up. Chairman Dorgan said that two years of work went into the Indian Health Care Improvement Act and last year's white paper was meant to kill the bill. The Justice Department pledge to work with the Committee this year.

Navajo Health Committee Chairman Thomas Walker thanked Sen. Byron Dorgan after the hearing saying, "we appreciate your support, Senator in passing the act this year."

The Navajo delegation, who finished a very successful week in Washington include Dr. Madan R. Poudel, PhD, Health Services Administrator, Herman Largo, Department Manager III, Department of Behavioral Health Services, Albert Long, Senior Program Specialist, Department of Behavioral Health Services, Hank Haskie, Senior Nutritionist, Navajo Special Diabetes Project, Elmer Clark, Health Planner, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation assigned to the Dilkon Steering Committee, and Helen Bonnaha, Kayenta Steering Committee.

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